
The Mind of Primitive Man by Franz Boas

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NOTES AND REVIEWS

The Mind of Primitive Man. BY FRANZ BOAS. The Mac-Millan Company, New York, 1911. 94 p. Price, \$1.50.

Those who know Dr. Boas mainly through his books and articles dealing with various phases of ethnography may be surprised to find his name coupled with such a title as his last book bears. No one will read it however, without seeing that Dr. Boas is and must always have been much more than an ethnographer. Not only has he studied at first hand many tribes but he has studied them in the light of all the more important anthropological theories and without being prejudiced by any of them. Indeed, his concrete investigations could not tell as they do in the solution of the larger problems of the science had he not possessed a thorough grasp of those problems and seen clearly the kind of concrete results which would help towards their solution. Certain it is, that only an intimate knowledge of all phases of primitive life, such as Dr. Boas possesses in an eminent degree, could enable one to speak with so much authority and convincingness.

The book is, however, only in part a psychology of primitive man and the title is slightly misleading. About half of the chapter on "Racial Prejudices," deals with the arguments from physical anthropology having a bearing upon the relative inferiority or superiority of so-called 'lower' and 'higher' races. The chapters which follow, "Influences of Environment upon Human Types," and "Influence of Heredity upon Human Types," are further inductions from comparative anatomy and anthropometry. In these three chapters will be found what we believe to be incomparably the best critical and summary statement of the findings of physical anthropology relative to the cultural status of different peoples. Dr. Boas' conclusion is, "that the differences between different types of man are, on the whole,

small as compared to the range of variation in each type;" (p. 94) and that, taking all the conditions into consideration, there is no reason why we should consider any of the 'lower' races as more simian than ourselves, or as occupying a position in the evolutionary scale lower than our own.

Having disproved the physical inferiority of primitive man, it remains to discuss "The Mental Traits of Primitive Man and of Civilized Man." Here, too, we find nothing to the eternal disparagement of any tribal group, no reason to consider his inferiority as anything more than conditional and accidental. The greater rapidity of development in the Old World, for example, as compared with that of the New World "is adequately explained by the laws of chance" (p. 8). The mental differences between races are in nowise due to differences of inherent psychic ability but solely to the differences of social setting with their corresponding different influences of psychic heredity. The differences, then, are to be expressed in terms of social psychology rather than in terms of analytical or experimental psychology. Put these peoples into the proper 'psychic planes and currents' and they will shake off the old fetters of custom and tradition and emotional reactions that to-day hamper them; for, in a word, as the social setting is inclined, so the race conforms. Indeed, the "power with which society holds us and does not give us a chance to step out of its limits cannot have acted as strongly upon them [i.e., primitive peoples] as upon us"—(p. 20) a point well worth our consideration.

Although each chapter is complete in itself, through them all one increasing purpose runs. The discussions pave the way to the concluding chapter on *Race Problems in the United States*. Dr. Boas discusses here our shameful neglect and the crying need of a national bureau which should deal with these problems in a comprehensive and thoroughly scientific way. The painstaking care of the author in every phase of primitive life that he touches on, his lack of any theory to prove, the extent and thoroughness of the data on which he has based his inductions and the unexampled manner in which he has allowed the evidence to speak for itself, are themselves the best standing example of

the only sensible way in which such a study as he suggests should be undertaken. Our present unconcern is sufficient evidence—were there no other forthcoming—of the extent to which we share the essential traits of primitive man, viz. a self-satisfied conceit in the ignorance of our own ways and an utter disregard of the bearing of present conditions upon the issues of the future.

Dr. Boas convincingly points out that there is no gulf between primitive peoples and ourselves; that a matter of a few hundred or a few thousand years of arrested development counts for little when viewed from a more comprehensive cosmic standpoint, and that these peoples, while they develop more slowly than do we, may in the end advance farther than we.

The author tells us that we are always measuring other peoples by our own social stand accompanying moral and resultant emotional standards, just as we measure other individuals by our own yard-sticks; other peoples do the same by us; and his inference seems to be that the conclusions of the one race as to the inferiority of another are as true as those of the other races with regard to it. There is no absolute truth as to comparative cultural values. With regard to every phase of the mental life of man, whether that representative be your eminent British philosopher or the fetish-doctor plying his trade in darkest Africa, the author is a thorough-going pragmatist. W. D. WALLIS.

Half a Man. The Status of the Negro in New York. By MARY WHITE OVINGTON. With a Foreword by Dr. Franz Boas of Columbia University, New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1911. Pp. xi, 236.

The eight chapters of this book give the results of an honest and painstaking investigation of the economic and social condition of the Negro in the city of New York, carried on by the author, under the auspices of the Greenwich House Committee, of which she was a Fellow. The first chapter contains a brief history of the Negro in the city, from which it appears that, "before our large foreign immigration, the Negro was more needed in New York than to-day, and received a large share of satisfactory employment." The congestion of a great city has induced